LACAN AND LANGUAGE

A Reader's Guide to *Écrits*

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and

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To

Otto A. Will, Jr., M.D.,
who made this book possible,
the authors dedicate it
with respect, admiration, and gratitude.

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Introduction

Few interpreters of Freud fail to acknowledge the epoch-making significance of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), and for Jacques Lacan, in particular, the most radical of Freud's contemporary interpreters, this work contains the "essential expression of [Freud's] message" (1977, p. 159/509).[1] Nowhere, perhaps, is that message expressed more succinctly than at the beginning of Chapter VI ("The Dream-Work"), where Freud describes the dream as a rebus:

> Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical. A boat has no business to be on the roof of a house, and the headless man cannot run [etc.]. . . . But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms

[1] In citations of Lacan, the first pagination refers to the English translation of *Écrits* (1977), the second to the French original (1966).

> such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance. A dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort [1900a, pp. 277–278].

Lacan's own great design is to "return to Freud" in order to articulate the full import of Freud's "essential message" that was expressed in this landmark work. This means taking Freud's designation of the dream as a rebus "quite literally." But what does that mean? Lacan's own response to such a question is, at first blush, puzzling: "This derives from the agency [*l'instance*] in the dream of that same literal (or phonematic) structure in which the signifier is articulated and analysed in discourse" (1977, p. 159/510). Puzzling or not, this response nonetheless contains "the essential expression" of Lacan's own message about how to interpret Freud's fundamental insight, namely, that "the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language" (1977, p. 234/594). But Lacan's own message is locked up in an expression so obscure and enigmatic that for the uninitiated it constitutes a kind of rebus in itself.

The essential elements of that rebus have recently (1977) appeared in English translation: nine essays, selected by Lacan himself from his more extensive major work, *Écrits* (1966). English-speaking readers now have the opportunity to decipher for themselves the same rebus that has puzzled or provoked or scandalized or inspired students of psychoanalysis in the French-speaking world for over 40 years. But if an English translation makes these essays available, it does not thereby make them intelligible. For the normal reader of English, a rebus they remain.

It does not seem unfair to characterize Lacan's writings in this way, whether one refers to their substance or to their style. For their substance deals with the nature of the unconscious as Freud understood it, hence with that dimension of human experience that lies beyond the ken of conscious, rational discourse and emerges into awareness only through a kind of diffraction that may assume many forms—in the case of the dream, for example, the form of a rebus. By saying, then, that Lacan's work, in terms of its substance, is a rebus, we mean to suggest that it is dealing with a theme that of its very nature escapes the constrictions of rational exposition.

But we call Lacan's writings a rebus with even better reason because of their style. For the style mimics the subject matter. Lacan not only explicates the unconscious but strives to imitate it. Whatever is to be said about the native cast of Lacan's mind that finds this sort of thing congenial, there is no doubt that the elusive-allusive-illusive manner, the encrustation with rhetorical tropes, the kaleidoscopic erudition, the deliberate ambiguity, the auditory echoes, the oblique irony, the disdain of logical sequence, the prankish playfulness and sardonic (sometimes scathing) humor—all of these forms of preciousness that Lacan affects are essentially a concrete demonstration in verbal locution of the perverse ways of the unconscious as he experiences it. And he makes no apology for the consequent difficulty for the reader. On the contrary, he relishes a "kind of tightening up. . . in order to leave the reader no way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult" (1977, p. 146/493).

The result is a hermetic obscurity in Lacan's writings that is all the more infuriating for being so deliberate. That is why they seem so much like a rebus: the reader feels that something significant is being said if only he could find out what it is. It is the modest purpose of these pages to follow the sequence of these essays—to work with the puzzle and try to comprehend this use of language—in order to gain some sense of what that something might be.

But first, who is Jacques Lacan? Although he is usually catalogued among the French structuralists, the fact is that, born in 1901 of an upper-middle-class Parisian family, he was already an established psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in France by the time the early essays of Claude Lévi-Strauss began to ap-

pear in the late '30s and '40s and structuralism in the contemporary sense was born.[2]

Lacan's clinical training in psychiatry began in 1927 and culminated in a doctoral thesis entitled *On Paranoia and Its Relationship to Personality* (1932). This work already marked a certain evolution in his thought inasmuch as his very first essays, no doubt heavily influenced by his teachers, had focused on the *organic* determinants of psychopathology. These initial researches left him convinced that no physiological phenomenon could be considered adequately, independent of its relationship to the entire personality that engages in interaction with a social milieu (1932, p. 400). It was to ground this conviction in an exhaustive case study that the doctoral work was undertaken.

The nub of the matter is the word "personality." Lacan speaks of it in the loosest terms as a kind of "psychic synthesis" (1932, p. 14) that adapts man to the milieu of society. As Lacan's own thought began to take shape after the doctoral thesis, two themes in particular intrigued him: the role of the image and the role of milieu in personality formation. The first, the role of the image, found articulation in an unpublished paper given at the Fourteenth International Psycho-Analytical Congress, Marienbad, 1936 (with Ernest Jones presiding), and entitled simply "The Mirror Phase." Mannoni (1971, p. 99) suggests that this was a first indirect answer to the question that arose out of the doctoral thesis as to why the paranoid attacks his own ideal in the image of someone else. The second theme, the role of milieu, found articulation in an article on "The Family" (1938) in de Monzie's edition of the *Encyclopédie française.*

But it was the doctoral thesis itself that brought Lacan his first renown—and, indeed, in unconventional circles. For at that time in France the scientific credentials of psychoanalysis were still highly suspect—particularly by the medical profession. If Freudian theory was accepted with enthusiasm by anyone, it was not by psychiatrists but by the literati and artists, principally the surrealists, who saw in it a confirmation, somehow, of their claim that dream and reality are ultimately reconciled in some sort of absolute synthesis that they called "surreality." Lacan's thesis appealed to the surrealists. What he said about the nature of symptoms was relevant to the problem of automatic writing and poetry. Beyond that, Salvador Dali, working on his own theory of the "paranoiac style" as it related to art, was intrigued by Lacan's theory and they became friends. Soon Lacan was a full-fledged member of the artistic set, rubbing elbows with Bataille, Malraux, Jean-Louis Barrault, etc. (Turkle, 1975, p. 335; 1978). Let these strange bedfellows—strange, at least, for the staid world of Parisian psychiatry—suggest something of the versatility of Lacan's thought and of the flamboyant theatricality of his personal—at least public—style.

[2] For a general introduction to structuralism, the reader may find the following helpful: De George and De George (1962), Ehrmann (1970), Gardner (1973), and Piaget (1968).

Style notwithstanding, Lacan was well known on the Parisian psychoanalytic scene by 1949 when, at the Sixteenth International Psycho-Analytical Congress in Zurich, he delivered a second, much revised paper on the nature of the ego, entitled "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience (1977, pp. 1-7/93-100). Here his thought develops the notion of "image," which he takes to be a principle of in-*form*-ation, i.e., of giving form to the organism in the sense of guiding its development. Lacan starts from what he takes to be a basic ambiguity in Freud's conception of the ego. On the one hand, "the ego takes sides against the object in the theory of narcissism: the concept of libidinal economy. . . . On the other hand, the ego takes sides with the object in the topographic theory of the functioning of the perception-consciousness system and resists the id" (1951, p. 11). We take him to mean that in the period when Freud's theory of narcissism was developing the ego was conceived as a love object and in that sense was in competition with ("takes sides against") other objects and was not identified with the subject's internal world as a whole (1914a, pp. 78-79). But after 1920, and particularly

in 1923, Freud speaks of the ego as seeking "to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavour[ing] to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id" (1923, p. 25), thus giving rise to the common conception of the ego as an agency of adaptation.

Lacan, for his part, explores the implication of the earlier conception and argues about the origin of the ego in this way: the newborn is marked by a prematurity specific to humans, an anatomical incompleteness evidenced in motor turbulence and lack of coordination. This state of fragmentation becomes camouflaged through the infant's jubilant identification with its reflection, experienced as a powerful gestalt promising mastery, unity, and substantive stature. Since this reflection (whose prototypical image is as seen in a mirror) is an external form, to identify with it as ego means to install a radical alienation and distortion in the very foundation of one's identity. The consequences of all this, of course, are enormous.

The nature of these consequences, e.g., the infant's experiencing of himself as a totality, of that totality as the idealization of all that it can be, and of that idealized totality as the rigid and armorlike structure that grounds the mechanisms of defense—all of that we must leave for the moment, for it will be thematized in the chapters that follow. Let us be content for now with observing that this was the level of Lacan's reflection (at least from what we can infer from his published work) when Lévi-Strauss' seminal essays began to appear. We can hypothesize that one reason why their impact on Lacan was so profound was that they suggested a radically and creatively new way to come to grips with his old preoccupation with the social component of personality.

Which essays of Lévi-Strauss were particularly meaningful to Lacan? His direct reference to two of them (1977, pp. 3, 73/95, 285) suggests that they had a special impact on him at this time: "The Effectiveness of Symbols" (Lévi-Strauss, 1949a) and "Language and the Analysis of Social Laws" (1951). In "The Effectiveness of Symbols," Lévi-Strauss interprets an 18-page South American shamanistic text, a long incantation whose purpose is to facilitate difficult childbirth. How is the cure effected? Lévi-Strauss sees it as a matter of making an emotional situation explicit in words and thereby making acceptable to the mind pains that the body refuses to tolerate. The transition to this linguistic expression that the medicine man provides induces the release of the physiological process—not unlike the work of psychoanalysis. In both cases, unconscious resistances are made conscious, and conflicts materialize in an orderly way that permits their free development and leads to their resolution. In the one case, a social myth provided by the healer specifies the patient's actions; in the other, the patient constructs an individual myth with elements drawn from her past. In both cases, homologous structures of organic processes, unconscious mind, and rational thought are related to one another through the "inductive property" in which the effectiveness of symbols consists (1949a, p. 201), as in poetic metaphor, which, according to Rimbaud, can change the world.

What is the nature of this unconscious mind for Lévi-Strauss? First, it is not the reservoir of personal recollections, images, and experiences, for these merely form an aspect of memory and are more properly called "preconscious." The properly unconscious consists of the aggregate of structural laws by which individual experiences are transformed into "living myth":

> The unconscious ceases to be the ultimate haven of individual peculiarities—the repository of a unique history which makes each of us an irreplaceable being. It is reducible to a function—the symbolic function, which no doubt is specifically human, and which is carried out according to the same laws among all men, and actually corresponds to the aggregate of these laws [1949a, pp. 202–203].

Lévi-Strauss draws on language itself in offering an illustrative analogy. The preconscious is the "individual lexicon"

containing the vocabulary of personal history that becomes meaningful to the extent that the unconscious structures the vocabulary according to its laws like grammar, "and thus transforms it into language" (1949a, p. 203). These laws are the same for all people and number only a few. Thus there are many languages, but few structural laws valid for all.

The fundamental, unconscious, and all-pervasive effect of linguistic structures constitutes the key theme of "Language and the Analysis of Social Laws" (1951). Here Lévi-Strauss begins by examining the view that the social sciences cannot lend themselves to mathematical prediction because of the biasing effects of the observer as well as the absence of statistical runs commensurate with the life span of the individuals and societies studied. In opposition to this view, he offers structural linguistics, especially phonemics, as a social science in which the requirements for mathematical study are rigorously met. The influence of the observer is negligible, since he cannot modify language merely by becoming conscious of it—indeed, much of linguistic behavior occurs on the unconscious level, including syntactic and morphological laws and the phonological oppositions that give each phoneme distinctive features. Furthermore, the variety and abundance of written texts in some traditions provide linguistic runs of four to five thousand years and hence the scope required for reliable statistical analysis. Following Jakobson (Lévi-Strauss, 1976), he goes on to suggest just such statistical studies of phonological structures, eventually leading to "a sort of periodic table of linguistic structures" comparable to the table of elements in chemistry. The ultimate purpose of such scientific analysis is "to attain fundamental and objective realities consisting of systems of relations which are the products of the unconscious thought processes" (1951, p. 58), thus leading to the following questions:

> Is it possible to effect a similar reduction in the analysis of other forms of social phenomena? If so, would this analysis lead to the same results? If the answer to this last question is in the affirmative, can we conclude that all forms of social life are substantially of the same nature—that is, do they consist of systems of behavior that represent the projection, on the level of conscious and socialized thought, of universal laws which regulate the unconscious activities of the mind? [1951, pp. 58–59].

How all of this affected Lacan at the time begins to be discernible in the famous "Discourse at Rome" (September 1953), later published under the title "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" (1977, pp. 30–113/237–322), which was the first comprehensive statement of his program. There he alludes to Freud's famous passage in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920, pp. 14–15), where Freud describes how his grandson dealt with separation from his mother by throwing a spool tied to a string over the edge of his curtained crib; while doing this, he would vocalize "o-o-o-o" and *"Da"* (*"Fort!"* and *"Da!"*; "Gone!" and "Here!").

For Freud, the meaning of the game is obvious. "It was related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting" (p. 15). For Lacan, the "cultural achievement" here does not consist simply in the child's "renunciation of instinctual satisfaction" but rather in his experience of desire for the mother precisely in separating from her and in dealing with his frustrated desire through the little game of which inchoatively verbal sounds were an essential part. In Lacan's words, the moment "in which desire becomes human is also that in which the child is born into language" (1977, p. 103/319). The statement is portentous, and careful consideration of it offers a convenient opportunity to gain some sense of what Lacan is about.

Let us begin with the latter part. What does it mean to say that at this point the child is "born into language"? Lacan's own enigmatic answer is as follows:

> [The child's action,] immediately embodied in the symbolic dyad of two elementary exclamations, announces in

> the subject the. . . integration of the dichotomy of the phonemes, whose. . . structure existing language offers to his assimilation; moreover, the child begins to become engaged in the system of the concrete discourse of the environment, by reproducing more or less approximately in his *Fort!* and in his *Da!* the vocables that he receives from it [1977, p. 103/319].

There is much here to be unpacked.

For Lacan, Freud's greatest insight was into the nature of the "talking cure," and a close reading of Freud's early work, principally *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905b), convinced Lacan of the importance for Freud of language and speech in psychoanalysis. Scientifically trained, however, Freud wanted to make his insights scientifically respectable, but the dominant scientific model available to him at the time was that of nineteenth-century physics. In our own day—and this is something that Lévi-Strauss helped Lacan appreciate—we have available another scientific model (a more characteristically human one) for understanding the psyche: the science of linguistics—a science that explores the structures discernible in the one phenomenon that is coextensive with man himself, i.e., human language. Lévi-Strauss had suggested the possibility of using linguistics as the paradigm of analysis in all of the social sciences, and Lacan follows this suggestion with regard to psychoanalysis. His task becomes, then, to explore the "universal laws which regulate the unconscious activities of the mind" (Lévi-Strauss, 1951, p. 59), where these "universal laws" are the laws of language and the "unconscious activities" are the processes that Freud discovered and that he designated simply as "the unconscious."

Any discussion of the universal laws of language must begin with reference to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), whose *Course in General Linguistics,* first published posthumously in 1916, must be considered the principal inspiration of linguistics in the contemporary sense. For the present, it will

suffice to recall that it was Saussure who emphasized the importance of distinguishing between language *(la langue)* and speech *(la parole).* For him, language is a "system of signs," essentially "social" in nature, existing "perfectly only within a collectivity," whereas speech is the "executive side" of language, i.e., the actual execution of it—"willful and intellectual"—in the individual subject (1916, pp. 13–16). That is why the issue here is the laws of language, not of speech. This distinction will prove central for Lacan.

Again, it was Saussure who in modern times stressed the fact that if language is a system of signs, then these signs are composed of a relationship between a signifying component (sound image) and a signified component (concept), the relationship itself being arbitrary, i.e., not necessary (e.g., there is no necessary connection between the word "horse" and our idea of horse—*cheval, Pferd, equus,* etc., will do as well).

Now in one of his essays Lacan speaks of these signifiers as composed of "ultimate distinctive features," which are the phonemes, i.e., the smallest distinctive group of speech sounds in any language. These signifiers in turn are combined according to the "laws of a closed order," e.g., laws of vocabulary and of grammar according to which phonemes are grouped into units of meaning of increasing complexity (words, phrases, clauses, sentences, etc.) (1977, p. 153/502).

The elementary particles of language, therefore, are the phonemes. In a classic study, Jakobson and Halle (1956) reported that all possible linguistic sounds may be divided according to a system of bipolar opposition into 12 sets of complementary couples, i.e., binary pairs. It was this method of reducing masses of data to basic elements that can be grouped in sets of binary pairs that Lévi-Strauss made his own (e.g., in classifying myths), constructing from the results an algebra of possibilities that for him designates underlying structures.

Given this analysis, then, when Lacan sees in the *Fort! Da!* experience an articulation "embodied in the symbolic dyad of two elementary exclamations [that] announces in the subject

the. . . integration. . . of the dichotomy of the phonemes, whose . . . structure existing language offers to his assimilation" (1977, p. 103/319), he seems to be saying that in this primitive fashion the child first experiences the bipolar nature of the ultimate rudiments of language, the phonemes.

Now the units of meaning composed out of phonemes (words, phrases, clauses, etc.) relate to one another along one or the other of two fundamental axes of language: an axis of combination and an axis of selection. Here again Lacan is indebted to the work of Jakobson (1956, pp. 53–87). Along the axis of combination, linguistic units are related to one another insofar as they are copresent with each other. Thus the words that form this sentence, even though stretched out in a linear sequence that suspends their full meaning to the end, are related to each other by a type of copresence, i.e., they are connected to each other by a certain temporal contiguity. Saussure speaks of such a relation as unifying terms *in praesentia,* and calls it "syntagmatic" (1916, p. 123). The second axis along which linguistic units relate to each other, however, is an axis of selection. This means that they do not relate to each other by reason of a copresence but rather by some kind of mutually complementary nonpresence, i.e., mutual exclusion, whether this is because one word is chosen over another as being more appropriate (e.g., we speak of Lacan as a "psychoanalyst" rather than simply as a "physician") or because one word implies the rejection of its antonym (e.g., by calling him a "structuralist," we imply that he is not an "existentialist"). Saussure speaks of such a relation as unifying terms *in absentia,* and calls it "associative" (1916, p. 123). Thus, to select one unit is to exclude the other, but at the same time the excluded other is still available to be substituted for the first if circumstances warrant. The axis of selection, then, is also an axis of possible substitution.

These two principles of combination and selection permeate the entire structure of language. Thus Jakobson (1956, pp. 63–75) was able to analyze the nature of aphasia according to whether the patient's speech is deficient along the axis of combination or the axis of selection. Now, when these two axes of combination and selection function in terms of the relationship between signifiers, we find either that signifiers may be related to each other by a principle of combination, i.e., in terms of some kind of contiguity with each other (e.g., a relationship of cause/effect, part/whole, sign/thing signified)—in other words, by reason of what the old rhetoric of Quintilian called "metonymy"; or that they may be related by reason of similarity/dissimilarity, hence by a principle of selection in virtue of the fact that one is substituted for the other—in other words, by "metaphor." For example, on the morning following the first Nixon-Frost interview in 1977, CBS radio news announced: "Nixon discusses Watergate; Australia has its own Watergate." Here, "Watergate" is twice used as a signifier, and the signified is both times the same, i.e., a political scandal. But the relationship between signifier and signified is different in the two instances. In the first case ("Nixon discusses Watergate"), the signifier ("Watergate") signifies "political scandal" by designating the place where it first began to be uncovered, hence by contiguity along the axis of combination, i.e., by metonymy. In the second case ("Australia has its own Watergate"), the signifier "Watergate," already clothed in metonymic associations, is used to substitute for the term "political scandal," hence is plotted along the axis of selection and functions as a metaphor. If we say, then, that signifiers are related to each other in the guise of either metonymy or metaphor, this is simply to transpose the laws of combination and selection into another key. Let this suffice, then, to indicate the sort of thing that is meant when Lacan speaks of the "laws of language."

But how do these relate to the nature of the unconscious as Freud experienced it? It is Lacan's thesis that Freud's insight into the nature of the talking cure was an insight into the way the laws of language work in a relationship between signifiers that may be described as either metonymy or metaphor. Let us be content with mentioning two ways in particular by which this may be understood so as to gain some appreciation of the flavor

none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (1977, pp. 153–154/502). In any case, the signifiers in this stream of associations relate to one another along the two great axes of combination and selection.

Perhaps this will become clearer if we look at the second way in which Lacan sees the "laws of language" structuring the operation of the unconscious, namely, in that operation by which the raw materials of the dream, such as the dream-thoughts or day residues, are transformed (usually with distortions) into the manifest content of the dream, i.e., by the "dream-work." The distorting process, according to Freud's economic theory, has two basic modes: "condensation," where a single idea represents several associative chains insofar as it is located at the point where they intersect (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967, p. 82), and "displacement," where the intensity of an idea is "detached" from it and passed on to another idea(s) of less intensity but related to the first by a chain of associations (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967, p. 121). Now Lacan, following the suggestion of Jakobson but developing it in his own way, claims that condensation is a form of substitution, grounded in the principle of similarity/dissimilarity, hence to be located linguistically along the axis of selection: in other words, it is basically metaphor. Displacement, however, functions by reason of contiguity, hence is to be located linguistically along the axis of combination: in other words, it is metonymy.

The dream of the botanical monograph Freud himself presents is an example of both condensation and displacement. First, of condensation:

> This first investigation leads us to conclude that the elements 'botanical' and 'monograph' found their way into the content of the dream because they possessed copious contacts with the majority of the dream-thoughts, because, that is to say, they constituted 'nodal points' upon which a great number of the dream-thoughts converged, and because they had several meanings in connection with the interpretation of the dream. The explanation of this fundamental fact can also be put in another way: each of the elements of the dream's content turns out to have been 'overdetermined'—to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over [1900a, p. 283].

What Lacan adds to—or makes explicit for—Freud is that these "nodal points" function as such because the laws of language, in this case the axis of selection/substitution, first make their metaphoric structure possible.

Again, according to Freud, the same dream from a different point of view is an example of displacement:

> . . . in the dream of the botanical monograph, for instance, the central point of the dream-content was obviously the element 'botanical'; whereas the dream-thoughts were concerned with the complications and conflicts arising between colleagues from their professional obligations, and further with the charge that I was in the habit of sacrificing too much for the sake of my hobbies. The element 'botanical' had no place whatever in this core of the dream-thoughts, unless it was loosely connected with it by an antithesis—the fact that botany never had a place among my favourite studies [1900a, p. 305].

What Lacan makes explicit for Freud here is that the loose connection between "botanical" and the "dream-thoughts," i.e., an ironic antithesis, is grounded in the axis of combination/contiguity that makes all such metonymy possible.

If Lacan says that the unconscious is structured "like a language" (1977, pp. 81–82, 159–164, 234/293–294, 509–515, 594), then the sense is that its processes follow the axes of combination and selection as all language does. In the "Discourse at Rome" we are told: "The unconscious is that part of [our] concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse" (1977, p. 49/258). Transindividual, it is

"other" than individual consciousness, "the other scene," or simply the Other. Other, it is yet discernible in bodily symptoms; childhood memories; one's particular vocabulary, life style, and character; traditions; legends; and distortions.

Let us return now to the child's game of *Fort! Da!*, the moment when he is "born into language," the fundamental sense of which we have tried to outline. That the child has the capacity to simulate the *Fort! Da!* with his "o-o-o-o" and "da" is a matter of native equipment. That at this point he begins to exercise it is a matter of maturation. Let us note, then: given a matrix of possible phonemes, it is the environment of the natural language that determines which ones the child assimilates; the pair that is assimilated expresses the experience of presence through absence; and what characterizes this moment for Lacan is the fact that although the natural language has surrounded the child from the beginning of life, it is only now that he actively begins to make it his own.

But how the child passes from this moment of incipient speech into the domain of language as a social institution is for Lacan much more than what it is, say, for a Piaget—simply a matter of "self-regulating equilibration." Lacan sees here a profound evolution from a dyadic relationship with the mother into a pluralized relationship to society as a whole. The father, then, is more than the third member of the oedipal triangle—he is the symbol and representative of the social order as such, into which the child, by the acquisition of speech, now enters. The social order is governed by a set of relationships that governs all forms of human interchange (e.g., the forming of pacts, gift-giving, marriage ties, kinship relations). This mapping of human relationships with their symbolic arrangements Lacan speaks of as "law," presumably to suggest the patterning, compelling quality of it. In any case, this law is characteristically human, for, Lacan writes, "in regulating marriage ties [it] superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating. The prohibition of incest is merely its subjective pivot" (1977, p. 66/277). This law is what Lévi-Strauss

(1949a, p. 203) has called the "symbolic function" structuring the primordial arrangement of society. Lacan, following Lévi-Strauss here (1977, pp. 61–62/272), finds that this primordial law that sets the pattern for human relationships is the same law that sets the pattern of human language. "[T]he law of man has been the law of language," he writes, "since the first words of recognition presided over the first gifts" (1977, p. 61/272; cf. p. 66/277).

In any case, the symbolic order represented by the father is the field, or domain, in which the child becomes an active citizen when he acquires the power of speech. The essence of Freud's discovery, Lacan claims, was to see the relationship between the individual and the symbolic order in terms of man's unconscious dimension. "Isn't it striking," he writes, "that Lévi-Strauss, in suggesting the implication of the structures of language with that part of the social laws which regulate marriage ties and kinship, is already conquering the very terrain in which Freud situates the unconscious?" (1977, p. 73/285).

Let this suffice, then, to suggest what Lacan has in mind when he speaks of the child being "born into language." But the full statement goes further. He tells us that the moment "in which the child is born into language" is also the moment "in which desire becomes human." Let us conclude this brief orientation, then, by trying to get some feel for what he means by that.

For Lacan, the fundamental driving force of the human subject, the dynamic power that propels him, is not libido or Eros, as for Freud, but desire. It is here, perhaps, that another great influence on him, namely Hegel, is most profound.

The Hegel with whom Lacan became familiar was Hegel as interpreted by Alexandre Kojève, a Marxist, whose brilliant lectures on the *Phenomenology of the Mind* (Hegel, 1807a) at the École des Hautes Études (Paris) from 1933 to 1939, were of seminal importance for Parisian intellectuals of pre-World War II France, among whom Lacan obviously found himself. There the role of desire in the Hegelian dialectic emerged in bold relief.

Kojève carefully elucidates the Hegelian argument: Man is basically self-consciousness, and he becomes conscious of himself when for the "first" time he says "I." But this occurs not in an act of knowing, in which he is absorbed by the object he knows, but by an act of desire, whereby he can experience himself in his desire by acknowledging his desire as *his*, and as distinct from its object. Now desire moves to action that will satisfy this desire. This action takes the form of negation, i.e., the destruction, or at least the transformation, of the desired object (e.g., to satisfy hunger, food must be destroyed, or at least transformed). Generally speaking, then, the "I" that desires, inasmuch as it desires, is experienced as an emptiness with regard to the object of desire and receives its positive content by a negating action of this kind, i.e., by destroying, transforming, or "assimilating" the object of desire.

Thus the "I" receives its positive content from the negated object of desire. "And the positive content of the I, constituted by negation, is a function of the positive content of the negated non-I" (Kojève, 1939, p. 4). If this desired "non-I" is thinglike (or "natural"), then the "I," through its negation of it, experiences itself as thinglike (or "natural") and achieves not self-consciousness but at best the mere sentiment of self that characterizes an animal. Hence, for the "I" to experience itself as self-consciousness, the non-I toward which its desire is directed must be another self-consciousness, i.e., another desire. Thus in the relationship between a man and a woman, for example, desire is human only if the one desires not the body of the other but the other's desire (1939, p. 6).

Now to desire a desire is to want to substitute oneself for the value desired by this desire. Therefore for me to desire the desire of another is in the final analysis to desire that the value that I am or that I "represent" be the value desired by this other. I want the other to *recognize* my value, i.e., my autonomy, as his value. Moreover, for the full human status of such a desire to come to light, man's specifically human desire (i.e., for recognition) must actually win out over his specifically animal desire

(e.g., for the preservation of life), so that the quest for recognition must be engaged in even at the risk of life, i.e., in a struggle unto death. To be sure, there must not be a real death in this struggle for recognition, lest the victory be a Pyrrhic one insofar as it destroys, through the death of the other, the very possibility of recognition by him. At best, the struggle can end only in the submission of one desire to another, as occurs in the eventual surrender of slave to master.

How this proceeds further in Hegel need not concern us now—the struggle between domination and submission (i.e., between master and slave) as it is reflected in the analytic relationship is a theme that recurs again and again in Lacan, and will be treated in its own time below. It suffices to say that Lacan's conception of desire presupposes the Hegelian model. For the moment it is more important for us to see in what way desire for Lacan "becomes human" coincidentally with the child's "birth" into language.

What Lacan means by the expression "desire becomes human" is hard to say with certainty. It may mean in strictly Hegelian terms that up to the moment of the *Fort! Da!* experience, when absence becomes present through language, the infant's so-called "desire" is not different from the appetition of an animal seeking the satisfaction of its bodily needs. Such gratification yields at best what Hegel calls a "sentiment" of self, but not consciousness of self as an "I" that is enunciated in speech. For his part, Lacan would describe this strictly biological appetition not as "desire," but only as "need." Desire, as he uses the term, could be said to "become human" at the birth of speech in the sense that for him desire in its specifically human sense emerges then for the first time in the initial experience of "want."

It is clear that for Lacan this is a crucial moment in human development. Up to that time the infant has been engaged with the mother in an essentially *dual* relationship—a quasi-symbiotic tie that psychologically prolongs the physical symbiosis in the womb, in terms of which the mother is the infant's All. But with the *Fort! Da!* experience that tie is ruptured. Ruptured,

too, is the infant's illusion of totality, its presumption of infinity. It experiences for the first time the catastrophe of negation (it is *not* the mother), the trauma of limitation, the tragedy of its finitude—in other words, its own ineluctable *manque à être* (to use Lacan's expression).

Now this use of the word *manque* is suggestively ambiguous. In itself, *manque* in French may mean "lack," "deficiency," or "want." Hence, *manque à être* would mean "lack of being," or "deficiency in regard to being," or "the state of being in 'want of' being." But this "being in want of" being may be understood also as "wanting" being, so that the most recent English translator renders *manque à être*—indeed, at Lacan's own suggestion (Sheridan, 1977, p. xi)—as "want-to-be." It is precisely this "want-to-be" that we take to be the key to Lacan's understanding of desire: the radical and humanly unsatisfiable yearning of the infant for the lost paradise of complete fusion with its All—a wanting born of want.

The moment is portentous. Desire erupts in the rupture of the primitive union with the mother. Now for Lacan, the signifier par excellence of desire is the phallus. He is not referring simply to the sexual organ of the male (penis), but uses the term in a way that it has been used many times before, i.e., symbolically—here as a symbol of perfect union between every infant (male or female) and its All. In the words of Serge Leclaire, it is a "copula." "It is even, one might say, the hyphen [*trait d'union*] in the evanescence of its erection; the phallus is the signifier of the impossible identity" (cited in Lemaire, 1970, p. 145). Cut off from its "copula" simply by reason of its finitude, the subject thereby suffers a primordial castration. This is also a moment of death, for if we can accept Heidegger's notion of death as the ultimate limit that de-fines a human being (i.e., sets him within definitive limits)—and Lacan alludes to Heidegger precisely in this context (1977, p. 105/321), suggesting that Heidegger is as significant a part of his philosophical background as Hegel—then the moment when "desire becomes human" is not only a primordial castration but also the first experience of the child as Being-unto-death.

Wrenched away from a dyadic relationship with its mother in the world of inarticulate images, the infant must now relate to her through a dialectic of desire, in which the subject's ultimate quest is for recognition by the desired. Traumatized by its want, the child wants, i.e., desires, to recapture its lost plenitude by being the desired of its mother, her fullness—in Lacanian language, by being the phallus for its mother. Alas, that is impossible. For the father (who *has* the phallus) is there: the real father, the imaginary father, and most of all the symbolic father, i.e., the "law of the father"—the symbolic order, structuring all human relationships and making it possible that absence become present through language.

How the oedipal struggle, transposed into these terms, finds its resolution, i.e., how the child comes to forgo its desire to "be" the mother's phallus and settle for the condition of merely "having" a phallus or "not having" it, or, to put the matter differently, how the child learns to accept its indigenous want *(manque),* i.e, finitude, with the consequence that the same law (of the father) that prohibits indulging the child's want to be the mother's phallus is the law that henceforth mediates this want through the linguistic structures by which desire will express itself (i.e., the symbolic order)—all this is too far-reaching a problem for appropriate discussion here. We shall return to it below. Let it suffice to say that from this point forward the child's desire, its endless quest for a lost paradise, must be channeled like an underground river through the subterranean passageways of the symbolic order, which makes it possible that things be present in their absence in some way through words—passageways whose labyrinthine involution resembles in its complexity the "rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings."

All of this does not add up to an "introduction" to the work of Jacques Lacan so much as an introduction to the studies to follow that takes the form of a mapping out of the most general

contours of the terrain they cover.[3] If the reader is to understand their nature, a word of explanation is in order.

We are convinced that Lacan has something to say that is worth hearing, and are interested in the larger import of it: theoretically (i.e., in terms of psychoanalysis), clinically, and philosophically. However, we have found (as has many a reader of the French text before us) that in order to gain access to whatever hidden wealth is here, an extraordinarily painful ascesis is necessary. These pages are a partial record of our own effort to submit to such an ascesis, and are shared with a larger public that others may be spared some of its rigors. What is offered here, then, is a kind of workbook for the reading of Lacan's *Écrits: A Selection* (1977). At best, it is only a beginning, i.e., a set of tools (to change the metaphor) to help the reader get started in his own reading of the text. In any case, it should be clear that nothing more is intended here than this set of tools—the real labor of reading Lacan's text is left to the reader (a reading, by the way, that we have found, as teachers, to benefit from reading aloud).

How are these tools designed? Each essay is considered as a separate unit and examined from three different points of view: (1) an overview of the argument that strives to articulate as succinctly as possible the substance of the essay—a look at the forest, so to speak, without becoming lost among the trees; (2) a mapping of the text that strives to follow, step by step, Lacan's own tortuous path through the underbrush; (3) notes that explicate the text where practicality suggests that this might be useful. In all of it, we are aware of how tentative our own judgments must remain, and have made certain choices in the face of Lacan's obscurity that subsequent understanding may well prove wrong. But a beginning must be made somewhere—and readers are invited to clarify and supplement our efforts

[3] For a more comprehensive introduction to Lacan's thought, the following may prove helpful: Bär (1971, 1974), Lemaire (1970), Mannoni (1971), *Times Literary Supplement* [London] (1968), and Wilden (1968). Perhaps the best general overview in English is Bowie's (1979) chapter.

In trying to ferret out the meaning of some of Lacan's allusions, we found *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (Harris and Levey, 1975) very useful.

with suggestions of their own. At any rate, these tools are not intended to stand on their own. They will make sense only to the extent that they are used as instruments to help break the code of Lacan's text itself.

But when all is said and done, it would be unfair to expect too much from a set of tools. After all, the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis is itself only a tool—the enigma of any given rebus remains to be deciphered. But if this quest for the understanding of one rebus in particular seems caught in a chain of signifiers that "is the ring of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings," let us take what cold comfort we can from the fact that "it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' [though] none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (1977, pp. 153–154/502), even when that happens in the text of Lacan himself.